

The Washington merry-go-round

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WASHINGTON — The full story can now be told how top CIA officials, working with the Nixon White House, attempted to obstruct the Watergate investigation.

From sources in the prosecutors' office, the FBI and the CIA itself, we have dug out new details which tighten the case against the CIA brass. The story can best be told in chronological order.

It began, of course, with the Watergate break-in early in the morning of June 17, 1972. An investigation quickly developed that some of the burglars had a CIA background.

This gave the White House conspirators an idea. They might be able to use the CIA to cover up their own connection with the crime. Here's how the plot developed:

June 22: The acting FBI director, Pat Gray, called CIA chief Richard Helms to ask whether the CIA had been involved in Watergate. Helms assured Gray that the CIA had nothing to do with the burglary.

June 23, 10 a.m.: President Nixon instructed his major domo, H.R. Haldeman, to tell the FBI: "Don't go any further into this case." Nixon suggested that Haldeman explain "this would open the whole Bay of Pigs thing."

June 23, 11 a.m.: White House counsel John Dean, acting on Haldeman's instructions, telephoned Gray to

suggest that the CIA was involved in the Mexican phase of the Watergate case.

June 23, 1 p.m.: The President again brought up the CIA in a private conversation with Haldeman. Referring to Gray, Nixon instructed Haldeman: "Just tell him to lay off."

June 23, 1 p.m.: CIA director Richard Helms and his deputy, Vernon Walters, were summoned to White House aide John Ehrlichman's office. Haldeman joined them and did most of the talking.

He explained frankly that the Democrats were "taking advantage" of the Watergate break-in for political purposes. He wanted the CIA, therefore, to advise Gray that the FBI "could jeopardize a covert CIA operation if it continued digging into the Mexican matter."

Helms replied that he had already told Gray there had been no CIA involvement in Watergate. Haldeman suggested that further FBI investigation might expose Bay of Pigs secrets. Helms disputed this. Haldeman insisted, nevertheless, that Walters — not Helms — talk to Gray.

June 23, 1:30 p.m.: Dean telephoned Gray to set up an appointment for Walters.

June 23, 2:20 p.m.: Haldeman reported to Nixon: "Walters is going to make a call to Gray. That's the way we put it, and that's the way it was left."

June 23, 2:30 p.m.: Walters called upon Gray and repeated the Haldeman lie. Walters not only claimed

the investigation could upset a covert CIA operation in Mexico but also suggested the investigation shouldn't go beyond the arrest of the five Watergate burglars.

June 26: Dean summoned Walters to the White House and asked him whether the CIA could put up bail for the Watergate defendants. Dean also wanted the CIA to pay their salaries if they were sent to jail. Walters objected that the CIA would be destroyed if it became known that the agency was providing money for the Watergate crew.

June 27: Dean called Walters back to the White House. Again Walters resisted funneling CIA money to the Watergate defendants, saying that expenditures within the United States had to be reported to Congress.

On the same day, Dean asked Gray to stop the FBI from interviewing two key witnesses because of their "CIA involvement."

June 28: At still another White House huddle, Dean emphasized to Walters the importance of confining the FBI investigation to the five Watergate burglars. The CIA deputy, asked for his advice, suggested blaming Watergate on the Cuban exiles.

In a telephone call to Gray, Dean asked him to hold up an FBI interview of another witness, citing "national security." Dean continued to give Gray the impression in subsequent

conversations the the CIA was involved in Watergate.

July 5: Gray phoned Walters to say he could no longer hold up the Watergate investigation to protect the CIA without a written request.

July 6: Walters delivered a memo to Gray, coming clean for the first time. The memo disclaimed any CIA interest in the Watergate burglars or the witnesses Dean had asked the FBI not to question. Walters also told Gray that he could no longer ask him to hold up future investigation for security reasons.

The memo, incidentally, identified Watergate ringleaders G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt, who were then known to the FBI only as George Leonard and Ed Warren. Yet Gray locked the memo in his safe, without showing it to the FBI agents on the case.

The following fall, Waterbugger James McCord wrote a series of letters to the CIA detailing how he hoped to avoid prosecution and to protect the CIA. These letters were reviewed by CIA counsel Lawrence Houston and Director Richard Helms. Yet they never relayed this crucial material to the Watergate prosecutors.

Indeed, Helms took care not to share information with the prosecutors. He sought to keep his own skirts clean instead by routing the information to then - Atty. Gen. Richard Kleinfelder and FBI chief Pat Gray, whom Helms knew were Nixon loyalists.